

LOS ANGELES TIMES  
9 June 1985

Part IV

# When Israel Jumped the Nuclear Firebreak

By Charles William Maynes

WASHINGTON

For many years Israel's supporters in the United States have worked assiduously, and with considerable success, to persuade American leaders that the security interests of the United States and the security interests of Israel are virtually identical. But now a number of sensational revelations suggest that yet another unexpected—and undesired—legacy of Menachem Begin's years as prime minister may be precisely such a gap between Israel's interests and America's own.

Over the long run the United States may have few security interests as central as its non-proliferation policy. Maintaining the nuclear firebreak is important both politically and militarily.

Politically, America's nuclear arsenals give it extraordinary power, power progressively weakened as others acquire nuclear weapons. Militarily, the lack of nuclear weapons in most of the rest of the world minimizes the danger of a nuclear exchange by two minor powers that could drag the superpowers toward the ultimate catastrophe.

Yet as important as this policy is to U.S. security, it now appears that, during the Begin years, the Israeli government may have taken a number of steps to undermine it. First to come to light was the illegal export to Israel, beginning in 1980, of some 800 sophisticated timing devices called krytons that can be used to trigger nuclear weapons. This disclosure was highly embarrassing to the governments of both Israel and the United States because so many commentators had taken such a critical position when Pakistan had attempted to acquire these timing devices illegally.

Indeed, the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the House of Representatives has proposed an amendment to the foreign assistance act that would end all U.S. aid to any non-nuclear country that attempted to acquire illegally from the United States "any material, equipment, or technology which would contribute significantly to the ability of such country to manufacture a nuclear explosive device. . . ." But this amendment would not apply retroactively, as early news accounts wrongly reported.

Regrettably, the illegal acquisition by Israel of such material may not be restricted to 800 krytons. According to the highly regarded *Aerospace Daily*, with

the benefit of illegally acquired U.S. material Israel has now deployed a number of Jericho II nuclear-armed intermediate-range (700 kilometers) ballistic missiles.

Both propellant and guidance systems were apparently developed with material obtained illegally from the United States. The missile is said to feature an inertial guidance system that sources claim was tested in Iran in the mid- to late-1970s when the relationship between the Shah's government and the Israeli government was close. In addition to the Jericho II, Israel's primary nuclear force now reportedly consists of low-yield warheads that the F-4, F-15 and F-16 could deliver, nuclear-capable Lance missiles and nuclear artillery rounds.

Although the *Aerospace Daily* reports, attributed to U.S. government officials, have not been confirmed by other sources, the questions raised cast new light on other, possibly related events during the Begin years. Thus, if Israel did decide to increase the size of its nuclear arsenal dramatically in that period, then Israel would have begun to worry about obtaining increased quantities of weapons-grade material to carry out its nuclear-weapons program.

Indeed, about the same time as the alleged deployment of the Jericho II, Israel did begin to express interest in obtaining a natural-uranium/heavy-water power reactor. And when supplier countries refused to assist Israel in this effort until it signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, at least some Israeli officials were willing, apparently, to obtain the necessary technology through illegal means. According to reports then appearing in *Haaretz*, Israel's most distinguished newspaper, Israeli Science Minister Yuval Neeman, among others, believed that Israel could obtain the necessary technology through "under- and next-to-the-table" deals. Perhaps some other unusual events of the period should now be reviewed in a new light. On Sept. 22, 1979, the world learned of a mystery flash in the South Atlantic Ocean that displayed the characteristics of a nuclear explosion. Precisely what happened has never been clear. U.S. government agencies disagreed on whether a test had taken place. But the CIA argued that if a test had taken place, Israel was its most likely author.

In June, 1981, Israeli bombers destroyed the Osirak reactor outside Baghdad. Such an action could be consistent with an Israeli decision to rely more openly on nuclear weapons. So would be the strategic debate that broke out in

Israel during this period as some prominent Israeli strategists argued that Israel should overtly go nuclear to deter the Arabs from a conventional attack.

Questions about the Israeli nuclear program could not come at a worse time. The 1985 review conference for the Non-Proliferation Treaty is scheduled for September. A record of American indifference to Israeli transgressions in such a sensitive area before the conference can do enormous damage to the American position. How can the United States be firm about Pakistan, for example, if it overlooks repeated Israeli transgressions of U.S. laws? How can the United States request strict nuclear accountability from others when it insists on none from one of its friends?

Yet now is also not a time for strain in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. For the first time since 1977, the Israeli government follows policies that are congruent with American aims in most key areas. Israel itself faces a grave economic crisis and needs American help. Provoking a crisis over nuclear issues may also limit the political possibilities for movement in other key areas such as the peace process with Israel's neighbors.

A U.S. Administration truly interested in this country's national security, however, really has little choice. The previous Israeli government under Begin apparently showed utter contempt for American laws and sovereignty. Over the long run the United States has no higher national security interest than preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Reagan Administration should therefore immediately undertake the following steps:

—Insist that Israel, which has offered to return the unused krytons, return all equipment or materials relevant to the manufacture of nuclear weapons procured in violation of the provisions of the 1977 foreign-assistance act.

—Demand the right of U.S. inspection of the Jericho IIs and all U.S.-made aircraft in Israel if return is physically impossible.

—Demand that punitive measures be taken against Israeli officials who cooperated in a knowing violation of U.S. laws.

The choice between this country's non-proliferation policy and its desire for good relations with Israel is a choice between the head and the heart. But in international relations a country's own interests come before friends.

*Charles William Maynes is editor of Foreign Policy magazine.*